

# Archibald H. Sayce and Ugaritic Studies\*



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## Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es aportar nuevos materiales para una biografía intelectual de Archibald H. Sayce. Concretamente se estudia su relación con los estudios ugaríticos a partir del análisis de sus publicaciones sobre la materia y de una carta inédita de Arthur E. Cowley sobre el desciframiento del alfabeto cuneiforme de Ugarit por Hans Bauer.

### Palabras clave

Hans Bauer  
desciframiento  
alfabeto ugarítico  
epigrafía

## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to provide new materials for an account of Archibald H. Sayce's academic career. In this instance, we specifically study his connection with Ugaritic studies. In order to do this we analyse both his publications on this subject and an unpublished letter from Arthur E. Cowley concerning the decipherment of the Ugaritic script by Hans Bauer.

### Keywords

Hans Bauer  
decipherment  
Ugaritic script  
epigraphy

## 1. Introduction

Archibald Henry Sayce (Shirehampton, 1845 – Bath, 1933) was an outstanding Assyriologist and epigraphist, one of the most brilliant of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His main works in this fields are related to the Urartian inscriptions (Sayce, 1882; 1923: 212) and the inscriptions from Mal-Amir in Susiana (1885; 1923: 228), the publication of some of the El-Amarna letters (1894; 1923: 258), the edition of the Aramaic papyri from Assuan

\* I am really grateful to Wilfred G. E. Watson for his help in writing this paper. Of course, any mistakes are my own.

1. See, for example, Sayce (1877a; 1888; 1907a; 1907b). See also Sayce (1923: 445).
2. See, for example, Sayce (1907c). See also, Sayce (1923: 161f).
3. See his contributions in Cesnola (1882). See also Sayce (1923: 150).
4. See Sayce (1923: 240, 255f., 268, 295ff., 308, 351).
5. The correspondence received by Sayce between 1869 and 1933 is preserved in the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford. It can be found arranged chronologically into nine volumes, with the reference numbers 41613 – 41621 (d. 62 – d. 70).
6. In fact, Sayce did publish a note about an Iberian inscription on lead (MLH.III F.6.1 = Untermann, 1990: 368ff.) discovered in Castellón de la Plana (Sayce, 1877b). The decipherment of the Levantine Iberian script by Manuel Gómez Moreno in 1922 proved that Sayce's transliteration of the inscription was essentially incorrect. However, he was especially proud of that work, since "it was this which led to my being elected an Honorary Member of the Royal Academy of History of Madrid in 1883" (Sayce, 1923: 140; Vidal, 2017).
7. See, for example, Corré (1966); Gordon (1968: 103ff.); Caquot, Szyner and Herdner (1974: 34ff.); Garbini (1979: 34 n. 21); Cunchillos (1992: 115ff.; 1994: 31ff.); Cathcart (1999); Smith (2001); Day (2002); Bordreuil (2009); Bordreuil and Pardee (2009: 3ff.); Bordreuil, Hawley and Pardee (2013) on the decipherment of the Ugaritic script.

(1906), his important studies on Sumero-Akkadian and Hittite cuneiform,<sup>1</sup> as well as on the Hittite hieroglyphic script,<sup>2</sup> his writings on Cypriot inscriptions,<sup>3</sup> his pioneering analysis of the inscription in the Siloam tunnel (Sayce, 1881; 1923: 192), his numerous copies of Egyptian texts<sup>4</sup> etc. By reading his memoirs (Sayce, 1923) and correspondence<sup>5</sup> it becomes possible to understand the importance of his epigraphic work. From them one can appreciate his interest in the widest variety of writing systems from around the world, from Linear A to Chinese ideograms (Sayce, 1923: 385), along with Iberian,<sup>6</sup> Etruscan and runic inscriptions. In his memoirs, Sayce explained his early interest in epigraphy as follows:

If I spent hours in listening to the Reading of books, I spent still longer hours in childish attempts to draw, and more especially to copy the pictures that I found in books. Strange characters had a peculiar fascination for me, and my chief delight was in a Hebrew Bible, the verses of which I copied over and over and again. Naturally I wanted to know what the characters meant, the result being that I knew the Hebrew alphabet before I had learnt my own. The Chinese script was another which caught my childish imagination (Sayce, 1923: 8).

Taking all this into account, in studying his career it is somewhat surprising that Sayce did not make any contribution to one of the most fascinating decipherments of the 20th century, that of the Ugaritic script.<sup>7</sup> However, despite his silence on the decipherment process, he was very interested in the cuneiform tablets found in Ras Šamra from 1929, since they were closely related to Sayce's own fields of research: Biblical studies, cuneiform texts, Canaanite culture... In fact, he published two brief articles on the Ugaritic tablets, paying special attention to the contributions by Bauer, Dhorme and Virolleaud on those texts. In this paper we will briefly analyze both papers by Sayce and will study in detail a letter from Arthur E. Cowley who, among others, informed Sayce on the progress in deciphering the Ugaritic script.

## 2. Sayce's works on Ugaritic tablets

Sayce was not in time to make any relevant contribution to Ugaritic studies. It is worth noting that the first Ugaritic tablets were found in 1929 (Schaeffer, 1929: 295; 1956), when he was 84 years old. However, despite his advanced age, Sayce was able to publish two papers on the texts recently found in Ras Šamra.

The first work was a historical and literary study on Canaanite libraries and archives. This article is mainly devoted to Ancient Israel, but Sayce used the data obtained from Ras Šamra to reconstruct matters such as the origin of the alphabetic script, the use of different languages and writing systems in a single archive, the existence of texts written on different materials (clay tablets, papyrus rolls), etc. (Sayce, 1931).

The second article was a philological study of the tablet RS 1.04 (KTU 1.42), a Hurrian text in the alphabetic script found in 1929 in the *Maison du grand Prêtre* (Sayce, 1932). This work is a very good example of Sayce's ability to

propose innovative, risky and often erroneous theories. Thus, according to him, Etruscan suffixes were attested in RS 1.04. This led him to conclude that the tablet was probably written either in Proto-Etruscan or in a sister-language of Old Etruscan. In order to support this hypothesis, Sayce reminded us that Teresh (= Tyrseni = Etruscans) were mentioned in Ancient Near Eastern Texts as the inhabitants of the south-eastern region of Asia Minor, which allows us to explain the use of their language in a Ras Šamra tablet. Throughout his career Sayce was widely criticised for his ability to propose bizarre theories such as this.<sup>8</sup> As Gunn and Gurney point out, “By the end of his life (...) he was considered a dilettante rather than a specialist, was criticized for his lack of intellectual penetration, and was made something of a laughing-stock through his vehement and outdated opposition to the work of continental orientalist”.<sup>9</sup>

In general, we should conclude that the contribution by Sayce to Ugaritic studies was very limited and of little relevance. The two articles mentioned did not contribute anything substantial to the new discipline, and his death in 1933 prevented him from producing new works on this subject.

### 3. The decipherment of Ugaritic script

The study of Sayce's correspondence deposited at the Bodleian Library in Oxford proves that Sayce closely followed the process of decipherment of Ugaritic. As can be seen in a letter, dated February 10th 1931, from the librarian Arthur E. Cowley<sup>10</sup> to him, Sayce tried to know all the news related to the Ugaritic tablets and their decipherment process.

The letter from Cowley, a typed text sent on the headed notepaper of the Bodleian Library, was the response to a previous letter from Sayce (“I have delayed answering your letter because I did not know the answers to some of your questions”) which we have not been able to locate. In terms of the issues dealt with, Cowley's letter can be divided into the following six points, which probably correspond to the six questions previously raised by Sayce:

(1) Cowley advised Sayce to publish his article “Libraries of Canaan” in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*.<sup>11</sup>

(2) He confessed to not remembering a bibliographical reference in which the Egyptian origin of the book of proverbs was defended.<sup>12</sup>

(3) He promised to send Sayce a copy of the Sumerian inscription “S. 557 Dungi” (i.e. Šulgi).<sup>13</sup>

(4) He expressed his wish for Sayce to visit Jericho in order to assess its value in situ after the first excavations carried out by John Garstang.

(5) He commented to Sayce about the latest studies by Hans Bauer regarding the decipherment of Ugaritic.

8. See, for example, Tyrrell (1884).

9. Gunn and Gurney (2004: 160). See also Worthington (2009-2011: 107).

10. Arthur Ernest Cowley (London, 1861 – Oxford, 1931), British librarian and Head of the Bodleian Library from 1919 until 1931. He was also a leading Semitic scholar, specialising in Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic (Tomlinson, 2004).

11. Sayce finally took Cowley's advice and published the article in this journal although with a different title (Sayce, 1931).

12. At one point in the letter Cowley suggests the possibility that the author of this study might be Adolf Erman (“Was it Erman?”). Indeed, in 1924 he did publish a list of correspondences between the Instructions of Amenemope and the Book of Proverbs (Erman, 1924). In fact, this is the reference that Sayce himself cited (1931: 786 n. 1).

13. AAIACB 1/4, Bod S 557.

14. Cowley is probably referring to UM 30-38-59 (Philadelphia, University Museum = RIME 2.1.5.2013). It is a votive inscription, incised on a bronze bowl, by a servant of Šar-kali-šarri. The bowl was found in Piravend (Iran). Langdon published the first edition of this text (Langdon, 1938: 281 n° 1).

15. Cowley is referring to Bauer (1930c).

16. RS 1.012 (KTU 4.14).

17. Hand-written annotation.

18. Bauer had proposed the reading *hršn* instead of *grzn* in a previous article (Bauer, 1930b).

19. Hand-written annotation.

20. Hand-written annotation.

21. Hand-written annotation.

(6) He told him about the existence of a copper bowl from Luristan with an inscription from the time of Sargon I, which had attracted the attention of Stephen H. Langdon.<sup>14</sup>

For obvious reasons, the point that interests us here is Number 5, perhaps responding to a previous comment by Sayce about the progress made in deciphering Ugaritic. We transcribe the whole paragraph below:

Bauer has a short article in the last number of the Z.D.M.G. which perhaps you may not have seen [sic] yet.<sup>15</sup> He transliterates number 12 of the Ras-Shamra texts<sup>16</sup> with some modifications of his previous values, and I really think it looks a little more probable. As you may like to have his latest values I enclose a copy of the table he gives in this article. He now gives up <sup>17</sup>גרון and reads, with his new values, *HRŠN*<sup>18</sup> [sic] which might perhaps be derived from the root <sup>19</sup>חרץ meaning to engrave or to dig. As you will see also his new values make *GDLT*<sup>20</sup> (גדלת) instead of <sup>21</sup>צדלת as formerly. However I am not spending much time on the texts, as it seems better to wait for Virolleaud's publication.

As Cowley points out, the letter to Sayce was accompanied by a handwritten copy (on two pages) by Cowley himself, specifying the values that the German Semitist, Hans Bauer, had given each of the Ugaritic signs, in October 1930. This is the transcript of Cowley's two pages, where he summarised the proposals made by Bauer:

Bauer's values as of Oct. 5th, 1930.

1	𐎀 =	t
2	𐎁	ʒ (ʕ)
3	𐎂	n
4	𐎃	q
5	𐎄	m
6	𐎅	ṭ
7	𐎆 =	ḥ
8	𐎇	ʔ
9	𐎈	p
10	𐎉	k
11	𐎊	w
12	𐎋	r
13	𐎌	h
14	𐎍	' (ʕ)
15	𐎎	' (w)
16	𐎏	š (meist ursemitisch ḫ)
17	𐎐	š ( " " ṣ, ṣ)
18	𐎑	s (oder ähnlich)

Bauer (cont.)

19	𐎒 =	g
20	𐎓	ḫ
21	𐎔	š (z)

22	𐎶	s
23	𐎶𐎵	b
24	𐎶𐎵𐎶	y
25	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵	l
26	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵𐎶	h (?)
27	𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵𐎶𐎵	d

The proposal by Bauer that Cowley transmitted to Sayce was an improved version which he himself had published a few months earlier (Bauer, 1930a). In his initial proposal, Bauer assigned values to 25 signs, 14 of which were correct (*b, g, d, h, w, y, k, l, n, ' , r, š* and two *aleph*-signs). Later, partly thanks to the contributions made by Édouard Dhorme (1930), Bauer was able to add to his list the correct identification of several more signs, thus completing its proposed decipherment, as it appears in Cowley's list. Shortly afterwards, in July 1931, Charles Virolleaud presented a complete set of values for the 28 signs identified in the tablets discovered up to that time.<sup>22</sup> Traditionally it was considered that this publication by Virolleaud marked the completion of the process of deciphering Ugaritic.<sup>23</sup> In any case, the letter from Cowley, detailing the work of Bauer, is in a way a recognition of the fact that Bauer pioneered the decipherment of the Ugaritic script. Soon afterwards, Claude F. A. Schaeffer himself, director of the French archaeological mission in Ras Shamra, also attributed priority to Bauer (Schaeffer, 1939: 37). In fact, Bauer's proposal, as Cowley transmitted it to Sayce, was almost definitive. Of the 27 values proposed by Bauer, 23 were totally correct and 2 almost correct (*s > š; š > t*). Bauer's table needed to be completed by the inclusion of four signs that had remained unidentified up to then (*d, z, z, ġ*).

Meanwhile, Sayce also recognised the importance of Bauer in the decipherment of Ugaritic script ("...the pioneering work of Professor Bauer"), although he said that he was following the proposals made by Dhorme ("The values I have assigned to the cuneiform characters are those given to them by Père Dhorme") (Sayce, 1932: 45).

The letter from Cowley demonstrates that Sayce followed the news related to the texts discovered by French archaeologists in ancient Ugarit with close attention. In fact, if he did not make any proposal regarding the decipherment of the Ugaritic script, it was due to the fact that it occurred very quickly and satisfactorily. Just two years after the discovery of the first alphabetic tablets, Bauer, Dhorme and Virolleaud (with the help of Marcel Cohen) had already managed to decipher them, in what Ignace J. Gelb defined as "one of the shortest cases of decipherment on record" (Gelb, 1963: 129). Hence no substantial new contributions were necessary, and Sayce remained silent on this specific question.

#### 4. Conclusions

Sayce was a prolific author, with great intellectual curiosity, able to publish a large number of works on many diverse subjects: Assyriology, Egyptology,

22. Virolleaud (1931a). Nonetheless, see Garbini (1979: 34 n. 21), Day (2002: 56) for a critical assessment of the role played by Virolleaud in the decipherment (e.g. Day, 2002: 56: "I must conclude that Virolleaud's role in the decipherment of Ugaritic has been generally overrated"). Recently, Bordreuil, Hawley and Pardee have demonstrated that the French linguist Marcel Cohen helped Virolleaud to identify the signs *y, g, z* and *t* (Bordreuil, Hawley and Pardee, 2013).

23. Bordreuil and Pardee (2009: 5). Diff. Day (2002: 53), who delay this date until January 1932, when the article by Virolleaud (1931b) was published.

Biblical and Classical studies, comparative philology, etc. Therefore it is not surprising that, despite being 84 years old when the first tablets of Ras Šamra were discovered, he was very interested in those texts. For age reasons, his contribution to Ugaritic studies was brief (only two articles) and of little significance.<sup>24</sup> However, if Ugarit had been discovered some years earlier, there is no doubt that Sayce would have made an important contribution to understanding Ugaritic.

24. Thus, for example, Sayce is not mentioned in the history of Ugaritic studies by Mark S. Smith (, 2001).

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